

Celebrating the Strengths of “Vulnerable” Neighbourhoods

The Caledon Institute recently published a framework for social inclusion for the City of Hamilton. The City had invited us to prepare this material in anticipation of its role as co-host of the PanAm Games in 2015 [Torjman and Makhoul 2011].

This sporting event is a pivotal moment for Hamilton in many ways. Perhaps most important: It will help create the foundation for a lasting legacy of sustained action on citizen engagement, participation and employment. While hosting is an honour for the City, the Games are largely an entry point to a bigger agenda: the vital work on social inclusion.

As part of its social inclusion plan, we recommended that Hamilton engage with its residents to enable them to articulate their ideas and concerns. We encouraged the City to talk with groups that typically are left out of City conversations and local events.

We also proposed that Hamilton move beyond individual residents and groups to incorporate a neighbourhood-based approach. A neighbourhood perspective may raise a different set of concerns than a process that engages only certain individuals or groups.

Our framework for social inclusion incorporated an appendix that set out a brief description of eight neighbourhoods that the community itself had identified as “vulnerable.” We built on this work to help make links with earlier efforts undertaken in the City.

However, the neighbourhoods identified and described as “vulnerable” actually have many assets that the paper does not clearly identify – even though we have documented these in other Caledon reports. Here is just one example of a neighbourhood with formidable strengths.

With Hamilton Community Foundation funding and the presence of a devoted community development worker, successful efforts were begun in the early 2000s to engage people living in

McQuesten – a neighbourhood in Hamilton’s east end. Residents came to identify and appreciate the personal and neighbourhood assets that could be used to improve their quality of life.

McQuesten continues to enjoy strong neighbourhood leadership. Today, 35 service organizations augment and extend residents’ work to enrich and enliven their community. Beginning with one before- and after-school recreation program for children located in a townhouse facility, McQuesten now has eight service hubs spread throughout the neighbourhood.

Since 2003, residents have enjoyed an annual street party started by a group of senior women who were encouraged to develop their capacity for leadership. At least 700 residents now attend this event each September. Every spring, some 650 people take part in an annual sports and leisure program sign-up event and springtime festival.

In 2008, a resident-led, multi-partner Community Planning Team was established. Multiple projects to ensure food security have been undertaken, including the establishment of a food bank, a large community garden and a bi-weekly shuttle for individuals who can not easily access grocery stores. The McQuesten Community Planning Team has developed a robust partnership with the McMaster School of Nursing to explore and respond to resident-identified health needs and priorities.

McQuesten is grappling with a serious employment problem. Census figures show that 53 percent of the neighbourhood’s adults are either unemployed or not looking for work (including students and retired seniors as well as those who have given up searching for work). Residents spent a Saturday in April 2010 mapping the assets they can contribute to a local roster of skills, time and interests. They hope that this initiative will spur further employment projects, including efforts to bring social enterprise and business entrepreneurship training and micro-loan projects to the area.

The Hamilton Community Foundation is moving further in its efforts in eight neighbourhood hubs. Staff members have worked to build a closer relationship among hub representatives. Discussions, newsletters and e-mail blasts are helping residents share ideas and successes.

These neighbourhoods are in the process of constructing personal and institutional relationships that will allow them to plan and act upon their respective visions for a healthier future. McQuesten is just one example of the many strengths upon which the City of Hamilton can build its social inclusion agenda.

Reference

Torjman, S. and A. Makhoul. (2011). *Social Inclusion in the City of Hamilton*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, June.

Sherri Torjman and Anne Makhoul